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Surveying American Jews and Their Views on Middle East Politics: The Current Situation and a Proposal for a New Approach

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ABSTRACT

This working paper takes up three related themes. In section 1, I briefly describe the issues relevant to surveying American Jews and highlight the importance of authoritative national surveys; in section 2, I note that these surveys have not included much exploration of American Jewish divisions over Israeli and American Middle East policy. In section 3, I propose the rudiments of a sample design that would meet the traditional needs of the national survey as well as the political opinion poll. This design is based on a rotating national panel of respondents, somewhat like the U.S. government's Current Population Survey. At the same time, data from earlier panels can be combined to increase sample size for the study of sociocultural issues that are less immediate in nature. Readers who are primarily interested in the issue of polling political opinion about Israeli and American Middle East policy may wish to read only sections 2 and 3. Those primarily interested in the proposal for a national survey based on a rotating panel may wish to read only section 3.¹

¹ I am grateful to Sergio Della Pergola, Yuval Elmelech, Bethamie Horowitz, Barry Kosmin, Tom Smith, and Efraim Yaar for comments on an earlier draft, or for discussion of the issues. Of course, I alone am responsible for what I made of their help.

1. THE MAJOR SURVEYS OF AMERICAN JEWS

America's Jews number some 5 to 6 million souls, depending on whose surveys you believe and—ever more important these days—how you define who is a Jew. Put another way, about one American in fifty is Jewish. That ratio makes it hard to sample American Jews in a cost-efficient way. Randomly sampling Americans would involve screening out 98% of the respondents. Problems shared with any large-scale national survey, of course, are also involved: it is harder to construct an adequate sample for a telephone survey in an era of cell phones and changing life styles.

Of course, if the federal census counted individuals by religion as well as by ethnicity (as the Canadian census does), we would have much more information. However, the federal government long ago determined not to ask its citizens directly about their religious affiliations.² American Jewish organizations strongly supported this policy, arguing that the alternative would be a violation of the separation of church and state. The fact that Nazi forces used census records to identify Jews (and the United States government used census records to find Japanese-Americans) only solidified these positions. So if there is to be systematic information about this moderately large, very articulate, well-organized, and politically active American group, it will be collected by voluntary organizations, and almost certainly by Jewish organizations.

Whoever does the survey must also confront the definitional issue: "Who is a Jew"? Given the large-scale intermarriage that has followed the general acculturation of Jews into American life, a great many young adults today are the children of intermarried parents. As a result, they have one parent who was born Jewish and another who was not. Sometimes that other parent has formally converted to the Jewish religion, or in some less formal way has become a "Jew by choice." Often that other parent has done neither. In any case, among today's young adult population who have a Jewish-born parent, *a majority* also had *only one* Jewish-born parent. Thus, a majority of young adults face their Jewishness as one among several ethnic and religious legacies connected with their families. There is nothing surprising about this situation in the context of American

² Indeed, if Jews identify as such on the federal census ancestry question, their responses are reclassified to a national, rather than religious response—for example to Russian ancestry.

ethnic (and indeed American religious) history: it is a common story with other descendants of European immigrants. The point is rather that this situation has not faced so many descendants of the *Jewish* immigrants in the past.

One result is that many people told the questioners in the last national survey that they were born to a Jewish-born parent, but that they themselves considered themselves Christian, or they reported that they had no religion. Nor was this response only a matter of religion; large numbers of these respondents made it clear that they did not consider themselves “secular Jews” in any sense either. In sum, people with mixed, complex backgrounds will identify in mixed, complex, and inconsistent ways. If we apply to their answers the rigid categories of 80 or even 50 years ago, we may as well close up shop: there is no reason to study continuity and change if we refuse to conceptualize the change. Of course, there have always been people at the fringes of the group; the point about the Jews today is that these people “at the fringes” have become very numerous, more typical of the group experience. Consider the following example. There has been some critical scrutiny of the 2000 survey on the grounds that it appears to have shown too large a fraction of Orthodox respondents among the group 18–29 years of age. However, in that survey among the same age group, the number of respondents who said they had at least one Jewish parent and considered themselves Christian was two-and-a-half times as great as the number who said they were Orthodox Jews. Incidentally, a quarter of those Christians also said that they considered themselves Jewish in some way. In other words, for every three individuals reporting themselves Orthodox, two reported themselves both Jewish and Christian.³ Who, then, should be considered as a Jewish respondent?

Surveys of American Jews have been of two main types. For many decades, particular Jewish communities tried to survey the Jews in their area—the Baltimore Jews, the New York Jews, the Seattle Jews. These surveys were typically contracted to survey

³ The discussion of the Orthodox has focused on their proportion among the subsample of respondents who were found to be “exclusively Jewish by religion.” See Leonard Saxe et al., *Reconsidering the Size and Characteristics of the American Jewish Population: New Estimates of a Larger and More Diverse Community*, Steinhardt Social Research Institute Report, January 2007 (version 1.3 March, 07); accessed April 27, 2007 at http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/files/Rec_AJP_V1.3.pdf. Nevertheless, the issue of their overrepresentation is also visible when all respondents of the relevant age are studied. Specifically, among all NJPS respondents 18–29 years of age, 8.6% reported themselves Orthodox, 22.9% reported themselves Christian, and among those reporting a Christian affiliation many also reported themselves Jewish (5.8% of all respondents, 18–29 years of age). To be clear: I, too, think it is important to clarify whether or not the Orthodox were overrepresented in that survey.

organizations, which typically turned to the membership lists of Jewish organizations (synagogues, community centers, donors to Jewish causes, and so on). Or they might rely on phonebooks, seeking out people with distinctive Jewish names and then adjusting the numbers by some factor to capture other groups (similarly, there were often counts of the decline in public school attendance on Yom Kippur). Obviously such methods come with a host of biases, biases that increase as Jewish affiliations decrease. To the local funding groups, the biases might matter less than to social scientists seeking to understand the group; still, even the local funders are concerned about missing so many who are unattached.

The second type of survey is much more costly: random surveys of households, typically through random digit dialing. Since even in the areas of densest Jewish settlement—the New York metro area and some metro areas in Florida—the Jews are no more than 10–15% of all residents, the costs of a random sample involves many more screening calls than interview calls. Sometimes this method has been used in conjunction with the first, sometimes alone.

A rough guess would be that there have been thousands of surveys of local Jewish communities since the early twentieth century, and certainly dozens since the turn of the millennium alone. There has therefore been a temptation to build up a national profile of American Jews from the many local surveys. This temptation has only grown as the local surveys are now kept indefinitely in online databanks. But giving in to this temptation brings punishment, and I think resistance is in order. First, such local surveys are very uneven in quality, undertaken as they have been by communities with different levels of funding and expertise. This variation affects both the raw numbers for given areas and the subtlety and depth of the questions. Second, such surveys do not add up to a national survey. Taken at different times, local surveys are likely count some people twice or more because people move; Americans move often and American Jews move more often still. Third, areas outside the major communities are especially unlikely to receive systematically high quality coverage, and it is here that social patterns will be changing most rapidly and numbers increasing. For all the reasons a country does not allow its municipalities to run local censuses in place of a national census, American Jews should be sampled at the national level.

Nevertheless, local surveys there will always be because local communities need in-depth knowledge of local conditions, of neighborhood changes, and other particular circumstances. It would be an improvement if these local surveys were related to a national set of standards. Such standards could not be enforced, but they would surely help shame communities thinking of a cheap fix.

National samples were first attempted in 1970, and then more perfectly in 1990 and 2000. The spectacularly expensive screening process attempted to include a wide array of identities. Simplifying, anyone born to a Jewish-born parent and anyone who chose to join the Jewish people (whether by formal conversion to the Jewish religion or informally) was included. These samples are known respectively as the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) of 1990 and of 2000–1. They were supported by the umbrella group for local Jewish communities, now known as the United Jewish Communities (UJC). The 1990 survey included some 2,400 and the 2000 survey some 5,000 Jewish households. Efforts were made, especially in 1990, to link these studies to national surveys of American religion so that the great cost of the screening calls would be linked to another survey purpose rather than wasted.

In both 1990 and 2000, the NJPS staff was employed directly by the Jewish funding group, although in both cases, consulting experts also included university professors. In 1990, the links to the university world were perhaps closer than later because the organization's research director, Barry Kosmin, also worked at the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center at a clearinghouse for Jewish research. The sample design and survey process in 2000 was plagued with more internal dissension and criticism, and some technical problems also occurred during the survey process that added to the sense of crisis, disagreement, bad faith, and so on.⁴

A second national survey was undertaken in 2000, paralleling the NJPS at a much lower level of funding. The philanthropist Felix Posen became convinced that the NJPS was not illuminating Jews who were uninvolved with religion, but were, in one sense or another, secular Jews; he funded a supplemental effort, the American Jewish Identity Survey (AJIS). Thus, for the year 2000, there were two national surveys and two sets of

⁴ My own understanding of all this is entirely based on informal conversations over the years with participants; I was not involved in any way with any Jewish community or NJPS study.

reports. And now there are two public use samples as well: the AJIS dataset has recently joined the larger NJPS dataset at the North American Jewish Databank. Thus, we have the invaluable opportunity to compare information from two national surveys of this hard-to-reach population, taken almost simultaneously.

There has been much scrutiny of the adequacy of the NJPS 2000 sample; a recent issue of the journal *Contemporary Jewry* was devoted entirely to methodological studies that appraised its use for research. Also, a major series of studies are underway at the Steinhardt Social Research Institute (SSRI) at Brandeis University, both to study the strengths and weaknesses of NJPS 2000 and to conduct an analysis of public-use surveys that routinely have a religion question (as an alternative way of establishing the number of American Jews).

The meta-analysis of national surveys that have a religion question may provide a more reliable and less expensive way to determine how to weight subsequent national samples of Jews—rather than relying on the weighting emerging from the huge survey effort to find the “Jewish needles in the American haystack.” It cannot, however, replace the many questions that have been asked in the NJPS, nor the many questions that have not been asked but should be asked.

The bitter debates about NJPS 2000 may have led to some underappreciation of the dataset; but I think that value has been underestimated also because of the way UJC reports based on the dataset have been constructed. Understandably, the Jewish organizational world has been most interested in the traditionally-affiliated people—for example, those who report that they are Jews by religion and only Jews by religion. Adding in those who say they are Jews, but are not religious, may seem to cover the population that is open to Jewish communal services, education, and philanthropy. However, as I stressed earlier, many people with Jewish origins are not captured by this definition. Instead of devoting special reports to these groups, or at least indicating the numbers of Americans of (recent) Jewish ancestry (typically, having had a parent born Jewish), the UJC has excluded these people from analysis. Partly this procedure is a willful act of boosterism by not facing the extent of community fragmentation; partly it is an understandable response to particular survey needs. Whatever the reason, the result has been that the UJC reports based on the NJPS dataset provide, to my mind, a

truncated, decontextualized view of the American Jewish reality. Nevertheless, to its undying credit, the UJC preserved the full dataset as a well-documented public use sample. The dataset can itself provide a corrective context to the UJC publications that were based upon it.

2. THE MISSING DIMENSION IN AUTHORITATIVE SURVEYS: VIEWS OF ISRAELI AND AMERICAN MIDDLE EAST POLICY

Generally, American ethnics can think of an ancestral homeland as the land from which their immigrant forbearers came. The case of American Jews is different. While they may think of Russia, the Ukraine, Poland, or some other section of east-central Europe as the land from which their forbearers came, Jews typically feel little attachment to these places, only perhaps a curiosity to see the places. The tie of American Jews to Israel is another matter; if there is one foreign country that holds special interest for them as Jews, it is likely to be the Jewish state. As a symbol of Jewish rebirth, or of Hebrew culture, Israel commands much more involvement than the places of east-central Europe from which the Jewish immigrants actually came. Of course, most American Jews are not really closely involved with Israel; indeed, one of the many services of the NJPS has been to show how few Jews have actually been to Israel. However, the NJPS has not asked the hard questions about the diversity of American Jewish opinion on Israeli foreign policies or of American policies towards Israel and the Arabs. What do American Jews think about the position of the Israeli government concerning the Wall? Concerning giving up East Jerusalem? Concerning the rights of Israel to build settlements in the territories? Concerning the honesty and motivation of Israeli, Palestinian, and Syrian leaders? Indeed, how much do American Jews know of these matters? What sort of pressure, if any, do American Jews think the United States should apply to Israel? What are the dangers of American pressure on the Jewish state? What sort of support should America provide? The NJPS has tried to capture some political divisions and some features of the connection to Israel. Thus, it asks about the respondents political *orientation*—liberal or conservative, Democratic or Republican. And it asks about the respondent's involvement with Israel: travel there, level of concern about its issues. But the NJPS does not get any

closer than that to the hot political issues relative to the Middle East, despite the fact that these issues are among the most central concerns of many Jews.

There are at least two important reasons why this is so. First, the NJPS surveys have been undertaken once in ten years; and a decennial census-like survey is a poor vehicle for the exploration of current politics, especially about political issues that seem to shift dramatically over short time periods. Second, it is far from clear that the UJC funders of the NJPS are eager to gather evidence of discord and division over this profoundly touchy subject to American Jews.

Inadequate Alternative Studies on Jewish Political Opinions about Israeli Policies

For years, the American Jewish Committee has published the results of surveys of American Jewish political opinion. For a long time, the survey was based on Jewish names and on lists of members of organizations. In more recent years, the survey has been based on a private databank of users that a survey research firm maintains: people earlier identified as Jews through random sampling of households are asked if they could be called from time to time to answer questions. But the AJC report on this survey rarely includes any data allowing us to examine whether the population answering the questions is representative of the American Jewish population (however defined). The AJC report of 2001 was a partial exception. From the data of that year, it would appear that the population included is notably skewed to older and more affiliated Jews than were the NJPS 2000–1 respondents described in the UJC publications.

Moreover, the AJC report, even if it were based on an authoritative sample, only tells us what percentage of Jews nationally agree with certain statements; the report is too crude, and the sample may be too small to allow us to learn *which* Jews hold certain opinions. Are supporters of the separation wall retired men in Florida or young female professionals in Seattle? The unaffiliated or the Orthodox?

Both of these problems—adequacy of coverage and the failure to report survey results for American Jewish subpopulations—also typify the polls recently conducted for Americans for Peace Now and the Arab-American Institute; the representativeness of the samples are suspect and the samples are taken “for all Jews” with no effort to break down subgroups of the population.

The Alternative Model: The Tel Aviv University Peace Index

Observers often comment that far more political criticism and debate takes place in Israel than among American Jews. So too, far more and better polling of Jewish (and Arab) opinion about Israeli international policies occurs there than here. In particular, the Center for Peace Studies at the University of Tel Aviv has polled the Israeli population monthly for many years on the current political outlook. No matter what the immediate situation, the Center always includes certain basic questions. As a result, it is able to report monthly (in the Israeli newspaper of record, *Haaretz*) on a “peace index”: the degree of support for a series of basic propositions. The sample includes Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs, and results are broken out for each. Results are also broken down for many subgroups of the population—for example, by political party, religious orientation, support for particular candidates for prime minister, and so on.

The key feature of the Tel Aviv University poll is the authority it commands. The Center does not shrink from reporting that the “peace index” is declining or rising, or that it is rising in the Arab sector and declining in the Jewish, or the reverse. Presumably the Center staff members’ own support for the index would have fluctuated over the years. And indeed the range of political opinions of those engaged in the survey seems to be wide. The reporting is straightforward and the processes of data collection transparent. People of all political beliefs can assess its outcomes with some confidence in what they are reading.

American Jewish political opinion needs to be captured in a comparably authoritative way so that the results are not dismissed as one more self-interested survey. Obviously, what is needed is not a slavish copy of the Tel Aviv University arrangements; and, in particular, there is no need for a monthly survey. But there is no reason why the Tel Aviv University survey could not serve as a model to be adapted.

3. PROPOSAL: A ROTATING PANEL TO MEET THE NEEDS OF A MODIFIED NJPS AND TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY PEACE INDEX

We can blend the strengths of the NJPS, the Tel Aviv University Peace Index, and the American government’s Current Population Survey (CPS). The CPS is conducted jointly

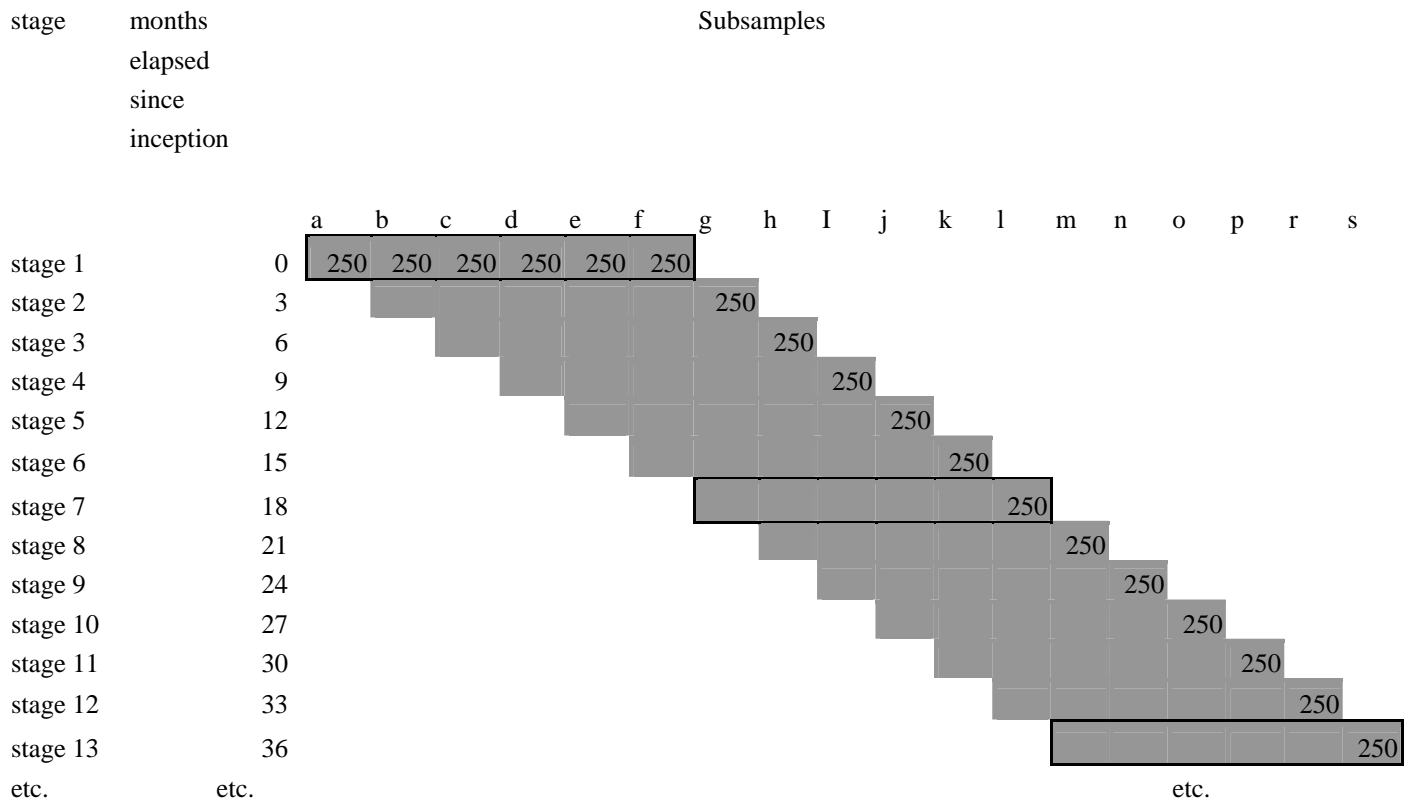
by the Bureau of the Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Of course, the CPS involves a much larger number of cases than proposed here, but the process of data collection could be similar. Specifically, the CPS adds *new subsamples of the population to a panel of respondents each month and rotates older subsamples out of the sample after 18 months.*⁵ Such a survey design requires the surveyor to preserve the contact information so as to reach the same respondents several times over the 18-month period that they are in the panel. Contact information would be deleted from public-use files.

Figure 1 shows an example of such a rotational plan, in which subsamples of households enter the sample at a given stage of the sampling process, each stage being three months apart in this example, and rotate out of the sample after 18 months. The entire panel available for polling at any given time includes six subsamples totaling 1,500 respondents. Over the course of any given year (after the start-up year), four new subsamples totaling 1,000 respondents are rotated into the survey.⁶

⁵ In the case of the CPS, there is another complexity that I ignore: households are rotated back in after a certain period, so that changes in their economic condition can be evaluated over time. There is nothing sacred about the 18-month lifespan for the subsample, but it may serve in the example presented here, and of course, the longer the lifespan of the subsample, the greater the difficulty of finding respondents for questioning.

⁶ The discussion here does not take account of sample member attrition during the course of the 18-month period of membership in the active panel. To the extent that such attrition is substantial (despite the best efforts to keep in touch with the respondents), either we will have to be content with somewhat fewer than 1,500 cases at any one moment in time or we will have sample somewhat more than 1,000 people each year to ensure that 1,500 remain in the panel. In either case, of course, it will be necessary to consider issues of reweighting due to sample attrition during the 18 months. Obviously, if the attrition problem is severe, it will be important to consider other solutions, such as keeping the sample members in the active panel for a shorter period of time. On the other hand, surveyors have had experience with preserving sample members in active panels, and that experience should help with estimation of attrition and weighing, as well as with keeping up with sample member mobility.

Figure 1. An Example of a Rotational Sample Design



The model shown:

At inception, 1,500 sample members are surveyed.


New subsamples of 250 are added at each stage after the first (I.e.: every 3 months).


Thus 1000 new sample members are surveyed each year (subsamples g-j in the first year)

Each subsample (after the first 5) leave the active panel after 6 stages (18 months).

The existing panel always includes six subsamples available for poll-type questions,
for a total available panel of 1500.

NOTES:

1) The period during which a subsample is in the active panel, available for polling: shown by shading: 

2) Active panels at least 18 months apart in time include none of the same subsamples. They can therefore be combined as independent samples; three examples shown in rectangles highlighted in black: 

There are several advantages to such a system of rotating subsamples in and out of a panel available across time.

1. The huge screening costs are spread out, so that after the first year the survey requires no more than 1,000 new respondents in any year.

2. As already explained, the great expense of sampling the American Jewish population involves the initial screening effort (reaching a small percentage of the population in random sampling). The advantage of “holding on” to a panel of representative respondents (albeit for a relatively short time) is that the panel’s political outlook can be sampled several times in the course of two years. The point is not so much to examine how the same individuals change their minds over time; it is simply to avoid the cost of screening in reaching a new sample of Jews. Also, of course, batteries of additional NJPS-type questions on origins and attachments could be added from time to time.
3. While an adequate number will be available for sampling political opinion regularly, it is also true that over the course of several years, non-overlapping panels will be available for NJPS-type questions. Thus, these panels can be merged to appraise responses to NJPS-type questions, so long as the researcher is aware that the panels were sampled over the course of a few years. For example, the subsamples of January 2010–June 2011 might be merged with those of July 2011–December 2012. For many research purposes, the fact that the data were gathered at different moments in time will not matter: basic patterns of Orthodox philanthropy and travel to Israel, or “just Jewish” marriage and Jewish education are not likely to differ over such time periods.⁷ This procedure is common today with the CPS samples of successive years to increase sample size. As a result, the sample collected at any one time need not be as large as the NJPS samples.
4. The Jewish population is extraordinarily concentrated: 58% of NJPS households were found in 10 metropolitan areas, another 33% are found in 61 other metropolitan areas, and only 9% are found in the rest of the country—where 323,000 Jewish households live among 34 million American households. It is true that even in the densest metro areas of Jewish settlement, reaching a Jewish household by random telephoning involves screening out a majority of the households reached—about 13 non-Jewish

⁷ And in any case, researchers could test the effect of time on results by comparing the first and last six subsamples.

households for every Jewish household reached. But to reach the last 9% of Jewish households among 34 million American households requires about 8 times as many screening calls per household. Indeed, reaching these last 9% of Jewish households actually requires about a third of all screening calls.⁸ Two suggestions for reducing the costs of sampling this last 9% of households follow: a) These households, once sampled, might be rotated out of the sample more slowly than the other sample members. At any given time, the sample will then be representative of the entire American Jewish population. However, some members will have been in the panel longer than others; b) A decision could be made to under-sample the last 9% (and weight them up accordingly), so that, for example, they might represent only 4.5% of sample members. The ability to study this group as an independent element would be impaired, but less so the ability to discuss (for example) the quarter of all Jews living in the smallest Jewish communities. This primitive division of the target population into three categories based on the density of Jewish population in each is, of course, not meant to serve as a replacement for the far more detailed classifications that surveyors have used for the NJPS and AJIS in the past; I simply mean to call attention to the potential for avoiding some of the costs of reaching those Jews living in the areas of lowest Jewish density.

5. Another way of saving on costs is being explored by the Steinhardt Social Research Institute: the melding of organization lists and random sampling. This is likely, I suspect, to save more among the 58% most accessible than

⁸ In practice, finding the Jewish needle in this general American haystack is somewhat easier than appears at first sight—that is, finding respondents who meet NJPS sample criteria among all Americans. Sampling is likely to be done by households, and Jewish households are relatively smaller than those in the nation at large. Thus, the percentage of Jewish households among all households is greater than the percentage of Jews among all Americans. Also, the 2% figure for Jews in the American population is somewhat misleading because the strategy envisioned here, as in the NJPS, would be to sample Americans of recent Jewish origin, a notably larger number than that usually quoted for American Jews. Thus, weighted NJPS 2000 data estimate about 3.75 million households represented by the NJPS respondent households. Nielson survey households for the country at large in 2000 were estimated at about 105 million. Jewish-origin households thus comprised, very roughly, about 3.5% of all American households—closer to 1 in 30 than 1 in 50. Based on these two data sources, Jewish households in the top 10 Jewish metro areas comprised 7.4% of all households, in the next 61 largest Jewish metro areas, Jewish households comprised 3.0% of all households, and elsewhere those last 9% of Jewish households comprised 0.9% of all households. It is these last 9% that require a third of the screening calls.

among the 9% least so. I am cautiously skeptical about this procedure. The issue is not whether the technique can be introduced effectively under the leadership of the Steinhardt Institute in the survey of Boston Jewry. Rather, the issue is whether or not that demonstration project can serve as an easily replicable model when fewer and less-talented professionals oversee local efforts than took charge in Boston (or when the same staff is called upon to dilute its attention across membership lists of 50 or more Jewish communities nationwide). Still, perhaps the process of melding organization lists and random sampling could be introduced in the half-dozen largest communities with little or no decline in quality control. Such an innovation should result in reductions to screening costs.

The Support and Organization of Such Sampling

The easy part first: datasets and documentation should be warehoused as public-use samples, free to all users who log on to a website and establish their credentials as valid users of social statistics as in currently the case for the AJIS, NJPS, and other datasets at the North American Jewish Databank. The processes of the intellectual marketplace can be trusted to ensure that if skewed and biased publications appear, other researchers with opposing views will draw on the same datasets. This, of course, is exactly what happens today in contemporary studies based on census (or CPS) data.

The hard part concerns organization and funding. It is difficult to appreciate how much of the effort to study American Jews has really been based *outside* the world of the American university, private research institutes, and federal agencies. Rather, community organizations whose main interest is *not* research but usable numbers have sponsored these surveys.⁹ The tendency to avoid the study of attitudes to the Middle East conflict has fit well with this mode of funding. There is a strong case for basing the sort of survey work described here in a university or academic research center—rather than as an afterthought, however well funded, of the organized Jewish community that reaches out to survey contractors. A board of trustees that also included representatives of Jewish

⁹ The creation of the Steinhardt Social Research Institute at Brandeis may signal the beginning of a new direction.

organizations would be essential in helping to determine the balance of questions to be asked. But in some way, the long-term stability and the intellectual independence of such an effort must be secured.